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by Scribe426

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Summary: Everyone has their own secrets and lies. The bigger they are, the more you try to hide them, the more people tend to get caught up in them. That is the lesson Haru Itsuno learns in Kyoto.

1. Chapter 1

Disclaimer: I don't own Hakuouki. Just Haru and the rest of the Itsuno family.

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><p>Chapter 1â€"Curiosity Killed the Cat

The streets of Kyoto twisted and turned like a giant maze. My little village outside of Edo was nowhere near this complicated. I took another right turn and froze when I came face to face with yet another alley. I stood there for a long moment, struggling to contain my frustration and irritation.

I had asked for directions at least five times, with varying success. The first person I asked had paled, stuttered out an excuse, and taken off at a dead run. I had been more careful after that. My destination had been getting more and more vague every time I asked. Unfortunately, that meant my directions were getting more and more vague as well. It was no surprise that I was now lost. Again. Again. Again.

"Damn Seiichi!" I growled, finally lashing out and kicking a nearby wall. I gave a small hiss of pain and balanced unhappily on one foot.

I took a deep breath and exhaled, watching my breath plume in front of me as I struggled to come up with the silver lining of this situation. One was that I was in Kyoto. The trip had been simple and

I hadn't had any trouble. Another was that I knew I was in Mibu. The third person I asked had pointed me in the general direction and the following two had gotten me there. So I was in the general area I needed to be in.

I scowled as I thought about my "silver lining". It really wasn't enough to make anything seem better. My sister had been kidnapped. My brother was missing, just as he had been for almost a year now. He was also the only hope I had of finding my sister. I was lost. My hands had gone numb in the cold. My feet ached from walking all day. I was hungry. And to top it all off it was dusk.

"Damn it!" I shouted, kicking the wall again with far more force than I had the first time. A sickening crack filled the silent alley, making tears of pain spring to my eyes. A stream of curses that would put a sailor to shame flowed from my mouth as I bounced on my left foot, my hands clutching my throbbing right.

"Hey, I hear something!" I heard a voice shout, cutting my curses short. Were they talking about me?

A group of men appeared in front of me. They all appeared to be a part of the same group, the light blue haori they wore extraordinarily distinctive. A pair of swords hung from each other their left hips, making me tense. I slowly lowered my foot to the ground, wincing as I tried to put pressure on it. Though everything pointed to the opposite, I could only hope it wasn't broken. Still, I allowed my hand to drift casually to my own sword. I would not allow myself to appear weak before them.

"Can I help you?" I asked calmly, my eyes drifting over the men as I tried to identify their leader.

"We heard someone shouting," a young man about my age spoke up. He was lanky, though he seemed barely taller than me. His brown hair was tied back into a long ponytail, as long as mine. His teal eyes met mine confidently. When no one rebuked him for speaking, I realized he must be their leader. My eyebrows rose fractionally, though I tried to keep my face neutral. It was surprising to say the least. "Was that you?"

"Yes, it was," I said after a pause. I had considered denying it, but I didn't think such an obvious lie would have gone over well. Having committed myself, I continued. "I kicked the wall and hurt my foot, is all." There was silence after that, the young man across from me staring at me in disbelief. Then a grin broke across his face.

"Really?" the young man managed as he struggled not to laugh.

"Is there anything else?" I asked, my voice noticeably cooler than before. The young man forced himself to stop laughing, though his eyes were still filled with mirth.

"No, just wanted to make sure everything was all right," he said.

I tilted my head at him slightly, a habit I had never quite been able to break whenever curiosity struck. As my curiosity grew, my anger faded. When the men had first approached me, I had been prepared for the worst. After all, they looked little more than a group of thugs,

ignoring their matching uniforms. Yet now this young man's honest concern with my welfare, though he hadn't known that's what it was when he came, was making me rethink that initial judgment. Whoever these men were, they were not thugs. And some part of me wanted to know who they were instead. With that, I finally relaxed.

"Thanks, but I'm fine," I said, giving a slight bow to show my appreciation. I straightened up and gave a wide smile. "I'm Haru Itsuno. And you?"

"Heisuke Toudou," he grinned. The men behind had slowly edged back into the street, obviously planning on leaving soon. "Anyway, if you're all right, I have to get back to my rounds."

"Sure," I said, feeling vaguely disappointed that I wouldn't be able to satisfy my curiosity. "It was nice to meet you, Toudou."

"And you, Itsuno," Toudou said with a cheerful wave before heading into the street with the rest of his men.

I wandered to the opening of the alley, watching them leave. The crowd parted for them automatically, almost in fear. As I watched, dozens of questions buzzed through my mind. Questions that I wondered if I would ever be able to answer. Once the blue haori were out of sight, I shook my head quickly as if to shake those questions away. I didn't have time for this. I had to find my brother. I heaved a sigh before limping down the street. Hampered as I was now, I wouldn't make any more progress tonight. It would be best if I found an inn.

I would resume my search for the Shinsengumi in the morning.

* * *

><p>Morning came far too early for my taste. I struggled to hide another yawn as I limped down yet another street of Mibu. Just as I had decided the night before, I had resumed my search almost the minute I had awoken. Not that my search was any more fruitful than it had been the day before. I had decided against spending the day asking for directions and instead wandered around Mibu. If I were lucky, I would eventually stumble across their headquarters. It wasn't a brilliant plan by any stretch of the imagination, but it was more appealing than having people run from me like I had the plague.</p>

I paused yet again by a wall, using it to help balance on my left foot. My right foot, while painful the night before, was now a mottled collection of blue and purple swollen to twice its size. Just as I had suspected the previous night, it was broken. Every step sent sharp pain lancing up my leg. As prudent as it probably would have been to rest for the day, I didn't have the luxury of time. It had been almost a week since my sister had been taken. The longer she was gone, the slimmer the chance I had at finding her. I had to find my brother as soon as possible.

"Why did you leave anyway, Seiichi?" I mumbled under my breath, twisting so my back rested against the wall instead.

When I was younger, the idea of traipsing around all of Japan in search of either of my siblings would have been unthinkable. It

wouldn't have been a stretch to say we hated each other back then, Seiichi, Airi, and I. It took the disappearance of my parents to change that. Left only with each other, we started to ignore our differences and work together to try and survive. For the next four years we got along better than was ever thought possible. But a year ago, Seiichi had left almost as suddenly as my parents had. He sent sporadic notes, never telling Airi and me much about where he was or what he was doing, but enough for us to know he was alive and well. The last letter had come three months ago. There had been a brief mention of the Shinsengumi, the reason I was looking for them now. If I could find them, they might be able to tell me the whereabouts of my brother.

"If I can find him, he can find Airi," I sighed, feeling utterly helpless.

A flicker of pale blue appeared in the corner of my eye, drawing me out of my thoughts. I turned my head to see the familiar haori from last night walking down the street. I made it quite a ways down the street before I even realized I had moved. I froze abruptly, causing people to yell at me in irritation. I ignored them, still watching the men in the blue haori. Why was I following them? I was supposed to be looking for the Shinsengumi. They had nothing to do with my search. I tried to turn away, to go somewhere other than where they were, but my feet refused to move. My curiosity had awoken again, the questions from before buzzing in my head. My urgency to complete my task faded away until the only thing I wanted to do was follow those men. After a bit more arguing with my common sense, I threw my hands up in the air.

"I suppose it's lucky cats have nine lives," I grumbled as I continued to walk as quickly as I was able. "Otherwise I would be long dead."

My injury kept me from catching up to the men, but I never did lose sight of them. As my curiosity demanded I do, I observed them as I walked. They didn't seem to have a destination, but they weren't wandering aimlessly either. Were they doing rounds then? Yes, Toudou had mentioned something like that. So they were on roundsâ€¢ to do what? And for who? And who were they to begin with? My eyes fell to the swords at their hips. Since they all carried them, they must be swordsmen. Samurai, then? Possible, but they didn't look like samurai. Ronin seemed too harsh to describe them, especially after my encounter with them the night before. But what did that leave?

Lost in thought as I was, it shouldn't have been a surprise that I finally lost them. My feet stopped again, though this time in hesitation. Where had they gone? There had been around fifteen of them. Fifteen men didn't just vanish into thin air. I took off at a much slower pace than before, far more aware of my surroundings than I had been in order to find them. This is probably what saved my life.

As I passed by an alley on my left, I heard a quiet hiss. Though my feet didn't stop, my body tensed. A flash of silver quickly followed, promising death if I didn't do something. My body reacted on pure instinct, all those hours I spent on training paying off. My right hand flew to my sword hilt, drawing it as quickly as I was able. I pivoted on my right foot, tears of pain springing to my eyes as I did so. The result was a loud clang of swords, soon followed by the

screams of the citizens as they panicked and ran. I ignored that, however, and focused on keeping the opposing sword away from me.

My opponent placed even more pressure on his sword, making me grunt in surprise and effort. My hands tightened around the suddenly slick hilt of my sword and I threw my weight forward onto my injured foot, hoping to surprise my attacker. It seemed to work, for the weight was suddenly gone. I tried to blink away the tears that were blinding me, my head twisting to try and find my opponent. I heard the wind of the sword stroke before I saw the sword itself. Again I turned to my left, catching the sword at just the last moment. My foot screamed in protest as my attacker bore down on me yet again. I gritted my teeth against the pain, though now tears streamed down my face, and again forced my weight forward. Again my attacker left me, though he didn't leave my blurry range of sight.

I flew forward with an attack of my own, the screeching of sword against sword equally expected and disappointing. I danced away before my attacker had a chance to retaliate, keeping his blurry figure in sight. I managed to make out the bright blue of his clothing and mentally groaned. It was one of the men I had been following. My curiosity, still present, rejoiced at the discovery that they were indeed skilled with a sword. My common sense regretted that it was aimed toward me and insisted I find a way to escape. On any other day, I might have tried to fight. Today, however, I was injured and therefore at a disadvantage. My best chance was to run.

"Ah, ah, ah, little spy," my attacker crooned. "I can't let you escape. Try to run and I'll just have to kill you."

"Spy?" I repeated, taking a step back as he stepped forward. My weight once again rested on my right foot. Pain danced up and down my leg, making it shake. I didn't know how much longer it would hold. "I'm not a spy."

"Then why were you following us?" my attacker asked in amusement. We both took another step.

"Uhâ€œ|" I said brilliantly, unable to say anything in response. What was I supposed to say anyway? That I had been following them on a whim? While that was true, it was far less believable that me being a spy.

"That's what I thought," my attacker said triumphantly before leaping forward with another attack.

My right leg fell back as I prepared myself for the blow. I heard the swords clash together, but I didn't see it. I blacked out for a brief second as my leg finally gave out. When I regained my still blurry sight, I was on my back barely holding my attacker's sword from my neck. I could see his green eyes shining with excitement above me. My mind raced through any possible escape from this situation, but found none. Which meant I just had to try something and hope it would work.

I lifted my left leg and slammed my foot as hard as I could into his stomach. I heard the wind leave him in a rushed grunt, making me hope. Again using my left leg, I gave another kick, stronger than the first. I heard the cracking of a few ribs before he flew off of me

and into the wall on the other side of the alley. I scrambled onto my left foot and hopped over as quickly as possible, holding my right foot in the air. Though he had attacked me, I didn't want the man dead. My fears, however, proved unwarranted. The man had already managed to sit up and was now glaring at me in a far more hostile way than before. When he began to get back to his feet, I did the only thing I could think of. I slammed the hilt of my sword against the back of his head. He fell back to the ground like a rock, obviously unconscious.

My leg shook before crumpling, making me fall to the ground yet again. I sat there for a moment, panting. It was not lost on me that if I had been anyone else, I would not have survived. That brief moment I had lost consciousness would have been my last, not to mention that last kick would have been impossible. But that was all irrelevant seeing as I was still living and breathing. I shook my head quickly to force myself to focus on the issue at hand. My eyes remained locked on the man as I slowly stood again, almost expecting him to jump back to his feet. But he remained motionless. I sheathed my sword with a small sigh of relief. I looked around quickly, wiping my face clean of my tears. He hadn't been alone before. The rest of his men had to be close. That meant I had lingered far too long already. If I wanted to get away, I needed to do so quickly.

"See, curiosity killed the cat," I quietly lectured myself as I hobbled to the street. I didn't look back, not because I was confident I could get away but because I was afraid to learn if I couldn't. "If I hadn't followed them, I would never have gotten into this mess."

I continued along a similar line as I made my slow way down the street, constantly looking for those blue haori I simply couldn't ignore. But I had learned my lesson. I would never get anywhere near one of them again. I swore it on my sister's life.

* * *

><p>AN: This is something I've had written for a while. I wrote it ages ago. Then after a few months, I looked at it again, almost decided to rewrite the entire thing, satisfied myself with some edits, and saved it. Now, for fear I might mess with it AGAIN, I have decided to post it. Hope you enjoyed it!

2. Chapter 2

Disclaimer: I don't own Hakuouki. Just Haru and the rest of the Itsuno family.

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><p>Chapter 2â€"Ignorance Caught the Fool, Part 1

A week passed after my encounter with the man in the blue haori. I spent it in my room at the inn, resting my injured foot. My fight had placed a lot of pressure on my foot, probably worsening the injury. My knowledge of first aid was limited and a doctor was out of the question for various reasons. That meant my only option was to pray. Something I did every night with a religious fervor foreign to me at any other time.

I sneezed for what felt like the hundredth time that day, sniffing lightly. I huddled further into my arms in a futile attempt to keep warm. My eyes remained locked on the street below me, constantly searching. While my vow kept me from approaching anyone wearing a blue haori, the obvious loophole was that I could still look for them. I took full advantage of that loophole, only rarely leaving my post next to the open window. The blue haori passing under my window tended to be the highlight of my day.

"I think I'm obsessed," I mumbled to myself, shifting to a slightly more comfortable position.

I had come to Kyoto for one reason: to find my brother. It had now been two weeks since the abduction of my sister. The passage of time had never weighed heavier on me. While I couldn't avoid the rest required for my foot, that didn't mean I had to stop thinking. And considering the situation, I should have been thinking about how to find the Shinsengumi, not about the men in the blue haori. But no matter how hard I tried, my mind remained locked on that bright color.

A familiar flicker to my left brought me out of my thoughts, my worries shoved to the side once again. My head jerked eagerly to my left as I jumped to my feet. I briefly acknowledged the lack of pain in my right foot before completely focusing on the approaching men. The first thing I determined was that neither Toudou nor the man who attacked me was a part of the group. I heaved a sigh of relief before continued my perusal. After a moment I picked out a familiar head of dark hair. Over the last seven days, this man had passed by at least four times. Naturally not a word was exchanged, but I had been watching closely enough to notice him.

My eyes had already drifted over the rest of the men when I felt it. A shiver made its way down my spine and the hairs on the back of my neck rose. Unwillingly, my eyes slid back to the dark haired man from before. My gaze clashed with his deep blue one and I found myself unable to move. Though I was too far away to make out anything, I could feel the judgment in his gaze. He was inspecting me, measuring me, determining my worth. I knew with a certainty I couldn't explain that he was deciding whether or not he should kill me. And though every fiber of my being screamed to run, I was rooted to the spot.

A quiet knock broke through the silence, breaking my trance and practically giving me a heart attack in the process. My hand drifted over my pounding heart and my breath came in short gasps. I didn't know how long I had been standing there, staring at him. It felt like an eternity, but it couldn't have been more than a minute. As I struggled to regain some semblance of control, my gaze flickered to the window again. The man, whoever he was, had already continued his way down the street. None of his men looked my way and no one on the street seemed bothered either. Whatever had just happened was unacknowledged by the rest of the world.

"Excuse me," a polite voice called, followed by another knock. I jumped again, still shaken.

"Come in," I called weakly.

The door opened as soon as the words left my mouth. The daughter of

the innkeeper, Emi, came in with a carefully balanced tray of food. The sight of her slowed my racing heart, calming me. She was a few years younger than me and very quiet. I was under the impression that she was extremely shy. But ever since I had begun my confinement, she had willingly brought me my meals. She even stayed a while afterwards to keep me company. It was a nice gesture that I appreciated.

"Here's your dinner," Emi murmured, glancing up at me shyly. When she managed to catch my eye, she looked away again, blushing brightly. I managed a small smile at that.

"Thanks, Emi," I said quietly as I walked over to her. I noticed, with no small amount of thanks, that my stride was even. It was almost as if I had never been injured.

"You're welcome, Itsuno," she replied, staring at her hands.

I began to eat, the silence between us not an uncomfortable one. I was lost in my thoughts, trying to understand what had just happened. Had that man known I was here all along? Or had he seen me on accident? And if it was an accident, was he going to tell the other man where I was? Were those men going to come after me now? Was I in danger? Before I could dwell on it any further, Emi broke the silence.

"How much longer will you stay here, Itsuno?" she asked.

"Hm?" I said to buy time, pausing in my meal. I thought about it for a moment. "I'm not sure. I thought I might go out again tomorrow. I think I've rested long enough. After thatâ€¦it just depends."

"On what?" Emi pressed urgently. I turned my head to look at her, surprised. Emi wasn't usually soâ€¦forward. For once she did not look away from my gaze, her brown eyes looking into my own pale ones almost pleadingly. My head tilted slightly as I tried to puzzle out her reason.

"On how long it takes me to find the Shinsengumi," I replied, seeing no reason to lie. Emi's eyes widened.

"Th-The Shinsengumi?" she squeaked. "A-Are you planning on joining them?"

"No," I said with a firm shake of my head. "I just need to ask them something." I elaborated no further on that. Emi continued to watch me her face conflicted. Finally she seemed to come to a decision.

"Their headquarters is only a few streets from here," she said. I froze, shocked.

"Noâ€¦" I mumbled to myself. Emi heard anyway and gave a firm nod of confirmation. I growled and slammed my fists against my thighs, making Emi wince. "Damn it, I was so closeâ€¦"

"If you'd like, I could show you," She offered hesitantly. I stared at her for a long moment before I felt myself grin at her.

"Would you?" I asked, unable to stop smiling. Emi turned red again

and nodded, looking away. "Thank you so much! You have no idea how much this means to me!"

I began to laugh in relief. I would finally find the group that had been eluding me. I could finally find Seiichi. And then I would be able to get Airi back. All of my other problems faded away upon thinking that. I went back to my meal, my smile never leaving my face.

* * *

><p>I was still smiling the next day as Emi and I headed towards the elusive Shinsengumi headquarters. My exuberant attitude drew many stares, but I didn't let it bother me. After two weeks, I would finally meet the men who could help me find my brother. My grin widened at that thought. Emi was watching me strangely.</p>

"Itsuno, are you sure you're all right?" she asked me. Her gaze flickered to my feet. "I thought you said you broke your foot."

"Huh? Oh, no, I'm fine," I said quickly. "I guess it wasn't as serious as I thought."

I didn't look at Emi, afraid she would be able to tell I was lying. My foot had been broken; the pain I had felt couldn't be explained otherwise. Under normal circumstances, a week wouldn't have been enough for the full recovery I had experienced. However, I knew better than anyone that my circumstances were anything but normal. I also knew that trying to explain it would bring more trouble than it was worth, which was why I was lying instead.

Emi opened her mouth to respond, but whatever she was going to say was lost. My attention was stolen when the more than familiar blue haori came into view. With all my previous encounters flashing through my mind, I grabbed Emi and dashed to the side of the street, my eyes never leaving the approaching men. Within a few seconds I had identified the one that acted as their leader. It wasn't Toudou, nor was it the man from the alley, or even the man from the previous day. Even from a distance I could tell he was tall, his bright red hair towering over most of the other men. He seemed to have a gentle demeanor from what I could tell, but I didn't allow myself to relax. He carried his spear with a confidence that displayed his skill more than a fight ever would.

As they drew closer, I placed myself in front of Emi. I couldn't get rid of the uneasy feeling in my stomach. Maybe my last encounter with these men had affected me more than I had thought. Or maybe it was the fact that the red haired man had been staring at me almost as long as I had been staring at him. I waited for them to arrive, every muscle in my body prepared to run. They finally stopped a few feet from me, the red haired man's golden eyes meeting mine. I could see curiosity in them, certainly, but there was also a good deal of animosity. He must have heard about me from his comrade.

"Itsuno!" Emi whimpered, her hand closing on the back of my kimono. Whether she was afraid on her own or my own nervousness was catching, I didn't know. I said nothing in reply. I only shifted my position in front of her. If this was to end in a fight, I didn't want her getting hurt.

"You're the one Souji mentioned," the red haired man finally said. It was not a question. Whether Souji was the one from the alley or the one I saw in the street, I wasn't sure. But I could guess.

"I suppose," I shrugged, trying not to appear worried. "I do have to point out it was self defense. He attacked me first."

"Because you were spying on him," the red haired man said just as calmly.

"I wasn't," I said harshly. He didn't flinch away, just continued to watch me. I didn't try to explain any further. After all, there was nothing else to say.

"Then what are you doing here?" the red hair man asked.

"I don't see how it's any business of yours," I started with narrow eyes, though my mind was already racing. What did my current location have to do with me being a spy? "But I'm out for a walk. Now, if you'll excuse me." I made to walk away, only to have the man shift slightly.

"I don't think so," he said, a grin curling his lips.

I stopped breathing when I saw that grin. It wasn't a friendly grin. It was predatory. I looked at his eyes again only to find they had gone cold. My heart fell into my stomach. Any hopes I had of this ending quietly were gone. My hand began to drift towards my sword.

"Itsuno?" I heard from behind me, making me pause. I had nearly forgotten. Emi was still here. She must be terrified. The last thing I needed was to get her wrapped up in my fight. I heaved a sigh and relaxed slightly, looking resignedly at the red haired man again.

"What do you want?" I asked wearily. The man blinked in surprise at my sudden change in attitude, though he quickly recovered.

"I'm going to have to ask you to come with me," he said, straightening.

"Fine," I said shortly, stepping forward. Emi's grip on me tightened suddenly.

"Itsuno, no!" she said desperately. I turned my head to meet her frightened gaze.

"Emi, it's fine," I said with a weak smile. It wasn't very comforting, but it was all I could manage. "Go ahead back to the inn. I'll be fine, I promise." Emi stared at me for a long moment, obviously not believing me in the slightest. Finally she leaned forward, pressing a quick kiss to my cheek. I stared at her in shock as she pulled away, her face bright red.

"Come back safely," Emi whispered before letting go. I just stared at her, still unable to move. She had just kissed me on the cheek. Me, of all people. I shook my head slowly in an attempt to restart my thoughts. I didn't have time to be thinking about this now.

"Shall we?" I said to the man. He just looked at me in amusement.

"You sure are accommodating for a prisoner," he said, already walking. I fell in step just behind him. The rest of the men followed. I turned one last time to look at Emi. She remained where we had left her, looking very alone and scared. I could only hope that she would make it back to the inn safely.

No one said a word while we walked, our pace remaining just fast enough for me to be uncomfortable. I didn't complain. I found it unlikely that the red haired man would take my welfare into consideration. Not as long as he thought me a spy anyway. I struggled to think of a way to convince him otherwise. Of course, I couldn't think of anything. Circumstance had made me appear a spy and the truth would do nothing to clear my name. Nor did I think a lie would help. I pressed my lips into a thin line while various curses, directed towards whatever deity happened to be listening and myself, ran through my mind.

Our destination came into view surprisingly quickly. Rather than the official looking building I wanted to associate with these uniformed men, it was simply a large house, completely ordinary in every way. In fact, as I went through my memories of my first days in Kyoto, I had probably walked by it at least once. The knowledge that I had come so close to these people who probably wanted kill me didn't sit well. I took a deep breath to calm myself. I had the feeling this was going to be a very long day.

The red haired man entered the household grounds, me just a step behind him. A number of men turned their attention towards us. While the red haired man seemed to be receiving mostly curious looks, the ones directed towards me were far more hostile. I ignored them as best I could, memories of my village coming to mind. I couldn't say I was unfamiliar with this treatment. Finally a man with messy brown hair and a green bandana appeared with a wide grin that seemed to be directed at the red haired man.

"Hey, Sano, I thought you were on rounds," he said. It appeared that he hadn't seen me yet.

"I was," the red haired man replied. "But I found something interesting." He sidestepped slightly to reveal me. The newcomer looked down at me, apparently shocked. I managed a sheepish wave.

"This is the spy that took out Souji?" the man finally barked, doubled over laughing. "He's a scrawny brat! This is priceless!"

"Isn't it?" the red haired man added, a grin of his own spreading across his face.

I stood there rather awkwardly as I watched the two men before me cling to each other in an attempt to stay upright as they laughed. I didn't have a clue as to what was so funny. Though my guess from earlier was more than confirmed. Souji, whoever he was, was apparently the man I had encountered in the alley. I wasn't sure how much time passed, but I didn't doubt that a lot more would have if a

voice hadn't interrupted.

"Oh? What's this?" a voice said.

The red haired man and the man with the bandana almost immediately stopped laughing, though they seemed ready to start again at any moment. Their eyes were locked on something behind me. Curiosity getting the better of me, I turned to look as well. The sight of this newcomer made me tense, suddenly wary though I couldn't quite understand why. His reddish brown hair was tied in a neat topknot, a slight smirk present on his face. His body was relaxed and he didn't seem hostile like most of the other men. For all his rather friendly appearance, it was his eyes that said otherwise. The bright green was cold and seemed to be promising me a painful death. As I continued to stare into them, I finally realized who it was: it was the man from the alley. My hand fell to my sword, my own gaze going cold. The other two men looked between the two of us warily, their mirth gone and obviously ready to step in if it came to that.

"You," I snarled. The man's, Souji's, smirk just widened.

"Nice to see you again, kitten," he said lightly. I stiffened.

"Kitten?" I repeated, my mind struggling to find an explanation for that. I heard the other two men snort in amusement. I turned and shot them a glare as well.

"Something so small trying to make itself look big to scare off an enemy it attracted with its own stupidity," Souji clarified. His eyes dropped down to my feet. "How's your foot doing?"

"Fine. What about you? Still have a headache?" I shot back. His smile faltered briefly, though it quickly recovered.

"Already gone, thanks," he said. He took a step closer to me. "Though I still think I have to kill you."

"Oi, Souji!" the man with the bandana murmured. I could hear his surprise, though I didn't bother to look at him.

"I'd like to see you try," I said instead, forcing a confident grin to appear on my face.

There was no doubt in my mind that Souji was able to kill me. I knew it was only the element of surprise and luck that I had survived the first time. I didn't think it would happen a second time. And if by some miracle I didn't die, I would probably be horribly injured and be exactly where I was a week ago. I didn't think I could survive another week of confinement. Yet my pride refused to let me put all that to words, or even really think about it. Instead, my mind was racing in hopes of finding a way out of this. So far, I hadn't come up with anything. I had reverted to cursing deities again, as if that would somehow get me out of this mess.

"If you insist," Souji shrugged, drawing his sword. I started to draw mine only to feel a large hand rest on my shoulder.

"That's enough, Souji," the red haired man said, a warning tone in his voice. "I'm going to take him to Hijikata. We'll figure out what

to do with him then." Souji stared at the red haired man for a long moment before sighing in disappointment.

"Fine," he said, sheathing his sword again. He met my gaze again, amusement curling his lips. "You got off lucky this time, kitten."

"My name is Haru Itsuno," I growled, relaxing my stance slightly now that I knew I wasn't going to be attacked. "Quit calling me that."

"But it's cute," Souji teased. Another growl from me just made him laugh as he walked away, completely relaxed as if our standoff had never happened.

"Stupid, arrogant, cocky, sadistic, smiley bastard," I mumbled under my breath. My body slumped slightly in relief as he turned a corner and left my sight. I glanced as the other two men again. They were both staring at me with slightly shocked looks. "What?"

"Spy or not, you've got balls to face Souji like that," the man with the bandana said with a disbelieving shake of his head.

"I guess," I mumbled, not feeling that was the case. It was more like I felt I had been backed into a corner and facing Souji had been my only option. I didn't like that feeling. It reminded me too much of my childhood. I turned to the red haired man, shoving my memories aside "Who's Hijikata?"

"He's the man who'll determine whether you die or not," the red haired man said simply. I felt my mouth run dry, though I managed a nod.

"Then let's go see him," I said.

I wasn't in a rush to have someone decided my fate. That wasn't why I decided to see Hijikata. If this man, whoever he was, had that kind of power, then maybe he also knew something about brother. Seeing him seemed to be the best option. So, with no small amount of trepidation, I followed the red haired man further into the house.

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><p>AN: So, here's chapter 2. As of right now, I have nothing else to say about it, but I do have something else to say. If you were skeptical of Haru's victory in the last chapter, I hope this chapter cleared some of that up. If you're still skeptical, just stick around. I promise to explain it. Anyway, thanks to everyone who read/reviewed/favorited/followed! It means a lot to me. I hope you all enjoyed this chapter and will read the next one too.

End
file.